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## Chapter 4

### The Buddha as Storyteller:

#### The Dialogical Setting of *Jātaka* Stories

*Naomi Appleton*

#### Introduction

*Jātaka* stories, or stories relating episodes in the past births of the Buddha, are ubiquitous in Buddhist texts and societies. Although there are many texts which contain *jātaka* stories, the largest and most well-known collection is that preserved by the Theravāda school and entitled *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā* or *Jātakatṭhakathā* (henceforth JA).<sup>1</sup> This collection of around 550 stories is partly canonical, for the verses are considered to be *buddhavacana* ('word of the Buddha'), and form part of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the Pāli scriptures. The prose, which in most cases contains the bulk of the narrative, is officially commentarial, and in its final form cannot be dated to before the fifth century CE. However, an early prose commentary must always have accompanied the verses since they are incomplete alone, and there is evidence to suggest that the text has held a quasi-scriptural position since early times.<sup>2</sup> The verses and prose fit together according to a set structure. First we find the story of the present, which sets the scene and explains the reasons for the Buddha telling the story of the past. For example, a community of monks might be discussing Devadatta's recent attempt to kill the Buddha, and the latter comments that this is not the first time he has done so, and tells a story of the past. This story of

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<sup>1</sup> V. Fausbøll (ed.), *The Jātaka Together With Its Commentary being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha* (6 vols, London, 1877–96). E.B. Cowell (ed. – several translators), *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* (6 vols, Cambridge, 1895–1907). N.A. Jayawickrama (trans.), *The Story of Gotama Buddha (Jātaka-nidāna)* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> The genre (if not the text) forms one of the nine *aṅgas*, or 'limbs' of scriptures, and had its own tradition of *bhāṇakas*, or oral reciters who preserved the texts. This and other evidence for the antiquity of the genre is explored in Chapter 3 of Naomi Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism: Narrating the Bodhisatta Path* (Farnham, 2010). I refer to the stories of the JA by the numbering found in Fausbøll's edition and Cowell's translation.

the past is considered to be the *jātaka* proper since it is here that the events of a previous birth (*jāta*) of the Buddha are related. Somewhere within or shortly after the story of the past are the verses, which may record a moral, some dialogue, or part of the narrative. At the end of the story the consequences of hearing it, such as the listeners attaining a specified stage of the path, are related, and finally the Buddha explains the ‘connection’ between the stories by identifying himself as one of the characters of the past; sometimes he also identifies other characters of the present (often members of his audience) with those in the past.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, the focus of most scholarship on this text has been the stories of the past, many of which have parallels in other story collections, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. However, the framing of the stories in the teaching career of the Buddha is also worthy of attention, and is the focus of this chapter. Other chapters in this volume (Hiltebeitel, Esposito) discuss the complex question of framing, and argue similarly that the frame of the dialogue determines how it might be understood by the reader or hearer.

As far as we are aware, no other Buddhist school had a collection of *jātakas* on anything like the scale of the JA. Indeed the tendency was not to gather the stories into a single collection at all; rather they form integral parts of other texts. Birth stories are frequently narrated in biographical texts (such as the *Mahāvastu*) and works of *vinaya* (especially the copious *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*), and collections of narrative that include birth stories of the Buddha alongside those of other figures are common. There are also literary *jātaka* compositions, the most famous example being Āryasūra’s *Jātakamālā*, an elegant Sanskrit work from around the fourth century CE that retells thirty-four stories from an unknown source. In this text there is no story of the present; indeed the stories are not narrated by the Buddha at all, but are rather outlined by the author relying upon traditional accounts. The same holds true for most other retellings of *jātaka* stories, right up to the present, where stories are frequently found in

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<sup>3</sup> For further explanation of the history and structure of the text see Oskar von Hinüber, *Entstehung und Aufbau der Jātaka-Sammlung* (Stuttgart, 1998).

children's books or modern media with no suggestion that they were originally narrated by the Buddha himself. The JA would therefore appear to be unique in that it exclusively contains *jātaka* stories and places these in a dialogical frame involving the Buddha and a variety of interlocutors.<sup>4</sup>

Given the set structure of the JA, and especially the emphasis in this text on providing a 'story of the present' that identifies the narrator (the Buddha) and his audience, we might ask what difference this makes to the text. Does it matter whether or not a story of the Buddha's past birth was narrated by him? Why does the JA include him as narrator and many other characters of the present as his interlocutors and audience if the focus is really the stories of the past? Who constitutes the audience for *jātaka* stories and what is their role? In sum, why are *jātaka* stories placed in a dialogical setting in the JA? This chapter is an attempt to answer such questions. Focusing on the JA, I will first investigate the role of the Buddha as narrator, rememberer, and revealer. Next, I will examine the audience for the stories within the narrative frame, and ask what their role is in requesting and receiving the stories, and what they tell us about the perceived purpose of the stories. Finally I will examine the relationship between the Buddha and his audience, and the characters in the stories of the past. I will suggest that the dialogical narrative frame of the JA, though deemed dispensable in other texts, adds extra layers of meaning and power to the stories.

## **The Narrator**

### *Author and Authority*

Let us begin with the first question: Does it matter whether or not a story of the Buddha's past birth was narrated by him? There are two sides to this question: what the Buddha's identification as narrator says about the Buddha, and what it says about the stories. We may begin with the latter.

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<sup>4</sup> The dialogical setting is not of course unique in Buddhist scripture, where many if not most texts are framed by biographical narrative and/or include indications of when, where and to whom the teaching was given.

It has been widely commented that the JA contains a lot of stories that have no discernable Buddhist content. Animal fables and stories of men whose wit and worldly wisdom get them out of sticky situations abound, sometimes at the expense of Buddhist ideals. For example, there is more than one story in which the Bodhisatta (Buddha-to-be) is a hero who kills his adversary, going against the central Buddhist precept of refraining from killing and providing a dubious example of the behaviour required by someone on the path to buddhahood. One such example is the story of the cat (JA 128) who pretends to be an ascetic and gradually eats his way through a group of mice-devotees, of which the Bodhisatta is the leader. Realizing eventually that something is amiss, the Bodhisatta catches the cat (or jackal, as he is in the prose) as he is about to pounce, bites his throat and puts an end to his life, after which ‘the company of mice returned and ate the jackal with a crunch crunch crunch. Or rather, I have heard, the first that came got meat, but those that were behind got none.’<sup>5</sup> This rather gruesome tale is also found in several non-Buddhist sources, which might explain the multiple identities of the villain, who is a cat in the title and verse but a jackal in the prose.<sup>6</sup>

The cat story is not the only story that has parallels in other texts, nor is it the only story that fits awkwardly into a Buddhist context. One way in which the JA functions is as a repository of narrative. Many stories were collected together into the text, and established as authentically Buddhist by being placed in the teaching career of the Buddha. The text contains everything from a Buddhist version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (JA 461) to a version of the well-known Aesopic fable ‘The Ass in the Lion’s Skin’ (JA 189). By collecting popular stories into the text, the JA indicated that the Buddha was the source of all these narratives and the worldly wisdom contained within them. The Buddha tells you how to deal with sham ascetics, how to escape

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<sup>5</sup> *Mūsikagaṇo nivattitvā sigālaṃ murumurā ti khādītva agamāsi. Paṭhamam āgatā va kir’assa maṃsaṃ labhiṃsu, pacchā āgatā na labhiṃsu.* Fausbøll, *The Jātaka*, vol. 1, p. 461.

<sup>6</sup> It seems likely that the identity of the villain was changed between the time of the composition of the verses (which must have been influenced by other Indian versions of the story) and the fixing of the prose. A jackal may have been deemed a more appropriate identification because of his similar characterizations in other *jātaka* stories.

murderous courtesans, how to avoid the dangers of sea travel, how to win kingdoms, and how to deal with difficult wives. He is also a skillful raconteur: he knows which story to tell for which purpose, is witty and has a keen sense of humour. With such a broad source of narratives, the collection contains a story for almost every conceivable purpose, truly demonstrating the all-encompassing wisdom of the Buddha.

There is a danger inherent in this: that the close association between the Buddha and worldly matters taints him and makes him appear less perfect. However, the Buddha's narration of the stories, and the Bodhisatta's participation in them, keep a careful balance between identification and distance through an alternation of first and third person narration. Both the stories of the present and of the past are actually narrated in the third person, the former by an anonymous narrator, and the latter by the Buddha. The only use of the first person is during the identification of the births, when the Buddha declares that 'I was such-and-such a character at that time.' Sarah Shaw assesses the effect of this narrative style as follows:

The threads of the Buddha, described in the third person, the 'he' of the Bodhisatta and the 'I' at the end of each tale are woven in and out of each other like a plait, evoking a succession of lives. These three elements suggest neither the 'eternalist' view, an abiding self, nor the 'annihilationist' view that the self ceases at death.... A moving point, like a kind of 'middle way', arises from the process itself, in the constant movement between the first person acknowledgement of the Buddha and his third-person character, the bodhisatta.<sup>7</sup>

As Shaw argues, the weaving together of first- and third-person narration in the JA allows the Buddha to identify himself with the story whilst simultaneously stepping back from it.

That the mix of first- and third-person narration in the JA allows the Buddha to balance his worldly and Buddhist authority is demonstrated further through comparison with other

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Shaw, 'And that was I: How the Buddha Himself Creates a Path between Biography and Autobiography', in Linda Covill et al. (eds), *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined: Biography in the Buddhist Traditions* (Boston, 2010), pp. 36–7.

*jātaka* texts. For example, the *Cariyāpiṭaka* (henceforth CP), a late scriptural text of the Theravāda, contains 35 stories narrated entirely in the first person. These stories, predominantly retold from the JA, claim to demonstrate the qualities acquired by the Bodhisatta during his quest for awakening. The stories are concisely narrated by the Buddha in the first person and are focused upon specifically Buddhist qualities, the perfections (*pāramīs* or *pāramitās*) required for buddhahood. Presumably because of this close identification between the stories and the Buddha (and buddhahood) there appears to be an attempt in the CP to distance the Bodhisatta from the morally problematic or insignificant actions that are found in the JA, and whole portions of narrative are therefore omitted. For example, the *Khaṇḍahāla-jātaka* (JA 542) is found as the six-verse *Candakumāracarīyaṃ* (CP 1.7) in the chapter on *dāna* (generosity). In the JA this story relates how a king, wishing to go to heaven and under the influence of an evil brahmin (the Buddha's cousin Devadatta in a previous birth), plans a large sacrifice which includes his wives and children, most notably his son Prince Canda (the Bodhisatta). Prince Canda tries to get himself (and implicitly the other sacrificial victims) freed but is eventually rescued only thanks to his wife's declaration of truth and the intervention of the god Sakka. In the CP this whole dramatic narrative is omitted and the story relates simply that after being freed from the sacrifice Canda gave great gifts. Strikingly, Canda has been made the hero of this tale, in contrast to the passive or even impotent role he plays in the JA, and the focus is therefore shifted to the virtues that qualify him for eventual buddhahood. Even more striking evidence of the CP's preoccupation with the Bodhisatta's qualities is found in the *Kapirājacarīyaṃ* (CP III. 7), which is told in the section demonstrating *sacca* (truth) and relates the failed attempt of a crocodile to kill a monkey (the Bodhisatta). In the parallel stories of the JA (57. *Vānarinda-jātaka*; 208. *Sumsumāra-jātaka*; 342. *Vānara-jātaka*) the monkey tells a lie to the crocodile in order to outwit him. In the CP we find the line: 'No lie was spoken to him, I acted according to my word'.<sup>8</sup> This looks like a deliberate attempt to rewrite the stories already

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<sup>8</sup> *Na tassa alikaṃ bhaṇitaṃ yathā vācaṃ akās'haṃ*; N.A. Jayawickrama (ed.), *Buddhavaṃsa and*

popular in the JA in order to give them a cleaner ethic, one that can be more closely associated with the Buddha and Bodhisatta. In contrast, the distance provided by the primarily third-person narration in the JA allows the Bodhisatta to have a wider variety of roles and act out much more human situations.

Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā* (henceforth JM) is located at the other end of the spectrum, for it presents birth stories narrated by an author wholly unconnected with the events. Thirty of the thirty-four stories in this text have parallel versions in the JA, and in some cases whole verses or phrases are identical, whilst other stories show significant variation from their Pāli counterparts. Whatever source Āryaśūra had at his disposal, his aim – as he tells us in his prologue – is to 'celebrate the wonders performed by the Holy One in previous incarnations' which are 'like conspicuous signs pointing the way to perfection' and by thus doing he hopes that 'these edifying tales give greater enjoyment than ever before'.<sup>9</sup> The enjoyment is indeed great: the Sanskrit is elegant and the stories are told concisely but not without colour or sophistication. As a literary composition, the text certainly exalts the Buddha by glorifying his past actions, yet it also seems very far removed from him. The absence of the Buddha from the narrative raises issues of authenticity, for the text is clearly authored many centuries after the time of the Buddha, by a named individual. This individual is only qualified to tell the story because he relies upon traditional accounts; that he is aware of this requirement is clear from the phrase 'according to tradition' (*tadyathānuśrūyate*) which begins each story. With the absence of the Buddha, even the Bodhisatt(v)a seems distant, narrated in the third person by someone hundreds of years after the character attained his final *nirvāṇa*. Quite simply, this text makes no claim to be scriptural or to preserve the words of the Buddha himself. It is thus far removed from both Buddha and Bodhisattva, in contrast to the JA's careful balance of connection and distance.

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*Cariyāpiṭaka* (London, 1974), p. 30, verse 310.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Khoroché (trans.), *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā* (Chicago and London, 1989), p. 3.



### *Visionary and Revealer*

The JA, therefore, manages to avoid letting the Buddha's identification as the narrator of its stories compromise his perfection, yet still allows his narration to give authority and authenticity to a rather diverse collection. Indeed, rather than compromising his spiritual authority, the stories actually bolster it, for as well as identifying the Buddha as the source of all popular narrative, the JA demonstrates his ability to *know* the stories. In other words he is shown to be a visionary who can see his own past lives and those of other people, and who can use these past lives in his teaching career. Whereas the CP and JM glorify the actions of the Buddha in his past lives, the JA also glorifies the Buddha's ability to remember these past lives.

Several formulaic phrases found in the JA demonstrate the importance that is placed upon the Buddha's unrivalled vision. When the Buddha is entreated to tell a story of the past it is because his interlocutor acknowledges that he cannot see it himself. For example, in the very first story of the JA the Buddha responds to a situation by mentioning events of the past, and the great lay supporter Anāthapiṇḍika, says to him that these past events are 'concealed from us and known only to you'.<sup>10</sup> He continues with a request that the Buddha 'make it clear to us, as if making the full moon rise in the sky'.<sup>11</sup> Assenting to Anāthapiṇḍika's request the Buddha tells the story of the past, 'making clear that which was concealed from them by rebirth'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in the introduction to the second story, the community of monks tell the Buddha that whilst they understand the present faint-heartedness of the monk under discussion, they do not know about his past acts of perseverance, for these are 'known only to you, the all-knowing one'.<sup>13</sup> Again, the Buddha assents to their request that he tell them the story of the past, thereby once more

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<sup>10</sup> *amhākaṃ paṭicchanno tumhākaṃ eva pākaṇo* (Fausbøll, *The Jātaka*, vol. 1, pp. 97–8).

<sup>11</sup> *ākāse punṇacandaṃ utthāpento viya imaṃ kāraṇaṃ pākaṇaṃ karotu* (Fausbøll, *The Jātaka*, vol. 1, p. 98).

<sup>12</sup> *bhavantarena paṭicchannakāraṇaṃ pākaṇaṃ akāsi* (Fausbøll, *The Jātaka*, vol. 1, p. 98).

<sup>13</sup> *tumhākaṃ sabbaññūtaññānasseva pākaṇo* (Fausbøll, *The Jātaka*, vol. 1, p. 107).

‘making clear that which was concealed from them by rebirth’.<sup>14</sup> This phrase recurs in each story until number thirteen, when the commentator states:

From now on we will not mention the entreaty of the monks or that which is obscured by rebirth, but will say only ‘he spoke of the past.’ But when this is said, all that has been said above – the entreaty, the simile of setting the moon free from the clouds, and making clear what was concealed by rebirth – are understood and should be said.<sup>15</sup>

These formulae then disappear from our text, but should – we are told – remain in our minds.

The term that I have here translated as ‘rebirth’ (*bhavantara*) literally means between (*antara*) becomings or existences (*bhava*) and is understood to refer to the experience of moving from one birth to the next. During this process certain memories are lost, thus the actions and experiences of one life are not remembered in the next. According to early Buddhism these memories can be revisited by practising the *jhāna* meditations. As an adept at these meditations, the Buddha is said to be able to see his own previous births as well as the workings of *kamma* on other beings as they fall away and take up new births; indeed these abilities form the first two of the three superknowledges that characterize the attainments of the Buddha during the night of his awakening. The ability to see past births is not limited to the Buddha, however, or indeed to Buddhist practitioners, though Buddhaghosa remarks that non-Buddhists can only remember as far back as forty eons, since their understanding is so weak.<sup>16</sup> The ability to tell these stories is not, therefore, proof of buddhahood, nor even of awakening, but it is proof of having reached an advanced spiritual state. This acts as another counterbalance

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<sup>14</sup> *bhavantarena paṭicchannakāraṇaṃ pākaṇaṃ akāsi* (Fausbøll, *The Jātaka*, vol. 1, p. 107).

<sup>15</sup> *Itoparaṃ pana bhikkhūnaṃ yācanaṃ bhavantarapaṭicchannatañ ca avatvā ‘atītaṃ āharī’ ti ettakameva vakkhāma, ettake vutte pi āyācanaṃ valāhakagabbhato candanṭharaṇūpamā ca bhavantarapaṭicchannakāraṇabhāvo cā ‘ti sabbam etaṃ heṭṭhāvuttanayen’ eva yojetvā veditabbaṃ.* (Fausbøll, *The Jātaka*, vol. 1, pp. 153–4).

<sup>16</sup> *Visuddhimagga* XIII 16; Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (trans.), *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* by Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa (5th edn, Kandy, 1991), p. 407. The Buddha can see millions of aeons, and the varying types of followers varying degrees in between.

to the worldly contents of the stories themselves. Thus by placing its stories in the mouth of the Buddha, the JA not only lends authority to a vast and diverse body of tales, it also demonstrates the spiritual achievements of the narrator and the great experience he has had of the world over many lives.

### **The Audience**

The Buddha is not simply an assumed author or a disembodied narrator in the JA; rather, his narration is located in specific times and places, which are almost always specified in the story of the present, along with the subject of the story. In addition, most stories specify the people who make up the audience for the stories, and sometimes their reason for requesting the story from the Buddha. So whom was the Buddha believed to tell these stories to?<sup>17</sup> The audience are most clearly divided along gender lines as well as according to the lay–monastic distinction, and so my focus here will be the fourfold community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.<sup>18</sup>

Out of around 480 stories that give explicit identifications of the Buddha's audience, eighty percent are told to a monastic audience.<sup>19</sup> More than two thirds of these are addressed to

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<sup>17</sup> I am not of course suggesting that the JA preserves an accurate record of the telling of *jātaka* stories by the Buddha during his teaching career. The absence of an equivalent text in other Buddhist schools, and the many-layered compositional history of the JA, suggest it was a compilation of stories made several hundred years after the death of the Buddha. Some of the settings may be accurate records, but most are formulaic and were probably regulated by a similar injunction to that in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* explored by Schopen (Gregory Schopen, 'If You Can't Remember, How to Make It Up: Some Monastic Rules for Redacting Canonical Texts', in Petra Kieffer-Pülz and Jens-Uwe Hartmann (eds), *Bauddhavidyāsudhākaraḥ: Studies in Honour of Heinz Bechert on the Occasion of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Swisttal-Odendorf, 1997), pp. 571–82). It is thus important to remember that the stories of the present are as much part of the narrative as the *jātaka* stories themselves.

<sup>18</sup> In some cases specific characters or backgrounds are given, for example see note below. Whilst these specific identifications are interesting, the broader picture is best illuminated, in my view, through concentrating on the gender and monastic division. The reasons for this will, I trust, become clear as we proceed.

<sup>19</sup> In the vast majority of the remaining stories, the implied audience is the community of monks, but this is not made totally clear.

the *bhikkhus* as a unit, with the remainder directed at individual monks, often those unnamed monks who are tempted to return to the lay life and need a story to dissuade them. The 20 per cent of stories addressed to a non-monastic audience include stories told to various laypeople, including kings, merchants, brahmins, and even a *brahmā* god called Baka.<sup>20</sup> Only six stories are told to the lay community as a whole,<sup>21</sup> in comparison with around 275 told to the monastic *saṅgha*. There is clearly a heavy bias towards a monastic audience within the narrative frame. This monastic bias might reflect the process of transmission of the stories, for these were preserved by monks. The claim that these stories were originally heard by monks and have been transmitted within the monastic community may have bolstered the perceived authority of monks to tell the stories.

Despite the heavy monastic presence within the narrative, it has often been assumed that *jātaka* stories are primarily teachings for the laity, that they are a form of popular Buddhism, and that they entertain more than they elucidate.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the internal audience is predominantly monastic might shed doubt on this assumption, though having different audiences within and outside of the narrative is perfectly possible. The main reason for believing the stories to have a lay audience is the content, which, as we noted above, is often rather worldly. However, these worldly stories are often specifically aimed at illustrating or solving *monastic* problems, particularly the difficulty of leaving behind (and resisting the temptation of returning to) one's wife. The story of a man whose wife repeatedly cheats on him until he eventually outwits her might seem very worldly, but its effect on a monk who misses

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<sup>20</sup> According to my statistics, 23 stories are told to kings, 12 to the wealthy layman Anāthapiṇḍika, four to members of the Buddha's family, five to brahmins, and one each to an Ājīvika and Baka Brahṃā.

<sup>21</sup> JA 421, 490, 494, 506, 511 and 543.

<sup>22</sup> As one example amongst many, J.G. Jones states as fact that 'the Jātaka was mainly concerned with the preoccupations of layfolk and had its currency mainly within the lay community'. John G. Jones, *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha: The Jātaka Stories in Relation to the Pāli Canon* (2nd edn, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2001), p. 72.

his wife is very much in accordance with monastic ideals. In addition, whilst many stories do play a part in sermons to the laity, they are also still used in both educational and ritual contexts within the monastery. The idea that *jātaka* stories are simple moral fables for the laity is thus a significant misunderstanding of the audience both within and outside of the narrative.

As well as the monastic bias, it is clear that women were not considered to have heard many of the stories of the JA. There is no explicit mention of a nun being told a *jātaka* story, though it is possible that nuns were considered to be included in the massed monastic audience. Some of the stories involve characters identified with nuns, for example Rāhula's mother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, and Uppalavaṇṇā, suggesting perhaps that they were believed to be present in the audience. Many more stories concern the dangers of interaction with women, and one assumes that these stories were aimed solely at a male audience.

In its absence of dialogue between the Buddha and nuns the JA is in keeping with the oldest Theravāda scriptures. Von Hinüber has recently pointed out that 'the Buddha is never mentioned as talking to any individual nun in the four Nikāyas of the Suttapiṭaka'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, these scriptures do not show any nuns being directly ordained by the Buddha, whilst individual nuns are only rarely mentioned at all, and only Ānanda and two other monks are said to have talked directly to nuns. On the basis of this evidence von Hinüber concludes that there was no order of nuns during the time of the Buddha, but that this was founded shortly after his death. Von Hinüber suggests that there were two rival factions after the Buddha's death, one loyal to Mahākassapa and the other to Ānanda. The latter, on the basis of social pressures such as the need 'not to be disadvantaged against any other religious movements such as Jainism',<sup>24</sup> won the battle for the founding of the nuns' order.

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<sup>23</sup> Oskar von Hinüber, 'The Foundation of the Bhikkhunīsamgha: A Contribution to the Earliest History of Buddhism', *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 11 (2008): 21.

<sup>24</sup> Von Hinüber, 'The Foundation of the Bhikkhunīsamgha': 25.

Von Hinüber's observations make absorbing reading, but I find myself unconvinced by his argument, for three reasons.<sup>25</sup> Firstly, as he points out, there is *some* evidence from the earliest texts that nuns existed at the time of the Buddha, for he is shown talking about them and ordering a monk to go and preach to them.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, there is evidence from the *Vinaya* as well as from material in the *Khuddaka-nikāya* that nuns were considered to have conversed with the Buddha. For example, ten of the nuns in the *Therīgāthā* claim to have met the Buddha in person, and Bhaddā the former Jain claims that he ordained her directly in the same manner in which he ordained the earliest monks.<sup>27</sup> Some of the nuns named as members of the earliest community are said to have lived at the same time as the Buddha, and furthermore Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, who is credited with founding and leading the order of nuns, is traditionally said to have predeceased the Buddha; the *Vinaya* records that the Buddha himself went to preach to her on her deathbed.<sup>28</sup> These texts are admittedly likely to be later than the *suttantas* that form von Hinüber's evidence, but not by so much that the history of the nuns' order could have been totally rewritten to obscure the fact that the Buddha never founded an order of nuns. Finally, and in my view most convincingly, one has to ask how the early Buddhist community would have been able to sanction female renunciants if the Buddha himself had not, especially if we accept von Hinüber's scenario of competing factions in the argument. Given the presence of

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<sup>25</sup> Since writing this I have come across a more detailed critique of von Hinüber's hypothesis to which I refer interested readers: Ven. Anālayo, 'Theories on the Foundation of the Nuns' Order – A Critical Evaluation', *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka*, 6 (2008): 105–142.

<sup>26</sup> The evidence is presented in von Hinüber, 'The Foundation of the Bhikkhunīsamgha': 22–4.

<sup>27</sup> See the verses of Jentī, Bhaddā, Vāsiṭṭhī, Sujātā, Anopamā, Cālā, Upacālā, Sīsūpacālā, Sundarī, and Subhā Jivakambavanikā. Bhaddā the former Jain declares (verse 109): 'Having bent the knee, having paid homage to him, I stood with cupped hands face to face with him. "Come, Bhaddā," he said to me; that was my ordination.' Norman's translation in Mrs C.A.F. Rhys-Davids and K.R. Norman (trans.) *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therīgāthā)* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> For all the sources which depict Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's interactions with the Buddha see G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* (Oxford, 1997).

nuns in the Jain community with which the early Buddhist community competed, the question of female ordination must have been raised with the Buddha, and either he sanctioned it (reluctantly or otherwise) or he did not. If the latter, then it is hard to imagine how it could have been sanctioned after his death.

A preferable explanation for the lack of dialogue between the Buddha and his nuns is perhaps that the monks' and nuns' communities lived rather independently, and may even have preserved different records of their own interactions with the Buddha and experiences of the Buddhist path. The *Therīgāthā* and *Therī-apadāna* appear to be examples of texts preserved by the nuns' community as counterparts to male-authored texts.<sup>29</sup> The four main *nikāyas* present a predominantly androcentric world, but this does not mean that there were no nuns, for as an undergraduate lecturer of mine used to say, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The androcentrism of these texts may simply reflect the fact that they were preserved by monks, and that these monks marginalized the nuns' community. The lack of nuns in the audience for the Buddha's *jātaka* stories suggests that the JA was also most likely preserved and used by monks.

Whereas nuns are never mentioned explicitly as listening to *jātaka* stories in the JA, there are a few that are said to have been told to laywomen. The Buddha tells one story (JA 512) to the laywoman Visākhā and her friends, who visit the Buddha during a drinking festival. Since Visākhā's five hundred friends have been joyfully participating in this festival, they dance, quarrel, and make improper gestures in the Buddha's presence. After having first sobered them up with a terrifying display of magical powers, at Visākhā's request the Buddha tells a story about the origins of drink. An un-named laywoman forms the audience for another story (JA 223) which the Buddha tells to reassure her that her husband will one day appreciate her kind

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<sup>29</sup> On the female authorship of the *Therīgāthā* see Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Richmond, 1998). On the *Therī-apadāna* see Sally Mellick, 'A Critical Edition, with Translation, of Selected Portions of the *Pāli Apadāna*' (Oxford University D.Phil. Thesis, 1993), and Jonathan S. Walters, 'A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story', *History of Religions* 33/4 (1994): 358–79.

nature. In a similar vein are two stories (JA 320, 333) that are told to the wife of a landowner, after the latter shows his ingratitude and lack of affection. In addition, laywomen are explicitly said to be included in the lay community on at least one occasion when they are listening to a *jātaka* story. Their presence in the narrative frame of the JA is therefore minimal, but they are at least represented.

Once again it is instructive to compare the audience within the narrative with that outside it. With the nuns' lineage only recently reintroduced in Theravāda countries after a long absence, we have little evidence to suggest whether or not *jātaka* stories formed a part of a nun's education. With laywomen we are on firmer ground, for the majority of the active lay community in Theravāda countries is female. Laywomen request and receive sermons, participate in rituals and festivals, and are generous donors to the monastery and temple. It is curious, therefore, that whilst the audience for *jātaka* stories within the JA is made up predominantly of monks, the audience for sermons (of which *jātaka* stories are often a part) is predominantly laywomen: the opposite to monks in all respects. There are no reliable sources to suggest which stories are most popular in sermons, but one assumes that the plethora of stories recommending that men be suspicious of women are glossed over in favour of those narratives advocating generosity and good conduct, which are equally numerous.

Studies into how *jātaka* stories are and have been used in Buddhist societies are sadly lacking, so it is difficult to compare the uses within the narrative with those outside it.<sup>30</sup> However, these internal examples of how the stories were believed to have been used by the Buddha do provide a possible model for later uses. In addition the audience are a model audience, requesting the Buddha's help in understanding their experiences, and responding appropriately. Explanations about when, where, and to whom particular stories were told also

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<sup>30</sup> Some evidence on the various uses of *jātaka* stories is found scattered through ethnographic works. I draw together this material and supplement it with my own observations in Chapter 7 of Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*.



preserve something of the original Buddhist community. Time after time we see poorly behaved monks dragged reluctantly to receive a telling-off from the Buddha. We learn about the character traits of key followers of the Buddha: the elder monk Sāriputta, we are told, was very stubborn; the king of Kosala respected the advice of the Buddha; many monks found a celibate life difficult.<sup>31</sup> In this way the JA is not just about the Buddha, but also all those people who had the great fortune of meeting him and hearing his stories. Many of these people became the last links with the Buddha after his passing, and were responsible for the continuation of his teachings, given to a variety of people to comment on or transform a variety of their situations.

Once again comparison with the other texts is instructive. With no audience within the JM to receive the stories and respond to them, we see no example of how to use the stories. Perhaps as a consequence of this omission, a redactor has added colophons to each story that suggest suitable purposes for it. For example, the first story is that of the starving tigress, who is saved from the temptation of eating her own newborn cubs by the Bodhisattva's generous gift of his own body as food. The colophon explains that this story inspires faith and demonstrates the importance of listening attentively to the *dharma* as it was brought to us with great difficulty. It should be used in sermons on compassion, as it demonstrates that great compassion has a reward.<sup>32</sup> In the case of the CP we have no evidence as to its use, though the purpose is clear: to

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<sup>31</sup> JA 69 tells of how Sāriputta gave up meal-cakes after being jokingly accused of overindulgence. His refusal to ever eat them again was much talked of by his fellow monks, prompting the Buddha to tell of similarly determined behaviour in the past, when Sāriputta was a snake who refused on pain of death to suck back his poison from a bite. JA 77 and 314, amongst others, show King Pasenadi approaching the Buddha for advice. Jones counts 24 stories that are told to a monk who is having difficulties resisting the charms of women (usually his former wife). Jones, *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> J.S. Speyer (trans.), *The Jātakamālā: Garland of Birth-Stories of Ārya-sūra* (London, 1895), p. 8. In the prologue to his edition Kern notes that the language of these epilogues is somewhat different to the stories but that he cannot be sure that they are interpolations, since they seem to represent a very old tradition. Hendrik Kern (ed.) *The Jātaka-māla, Stories of Buddha's Former Incarnations, Otherwise Entitled Bodhisattva-avadāna-mālā, by Ārya-çūra* (Cambridge MA, 1943 [first published 1891]), p. x.

glorify the Buddha and his path to buddhahood through an illustration of the perfections he acquired. Whether this is a narrative for monks, nuns, laypeople, or unbelievers is not clear, and neither is the appropriate audience response: should we worship the Buddha or aspire to be like him? Both the JM and CP may be more organized and elegant than the JA, and they are certainly more concise, but their lack of dialogical framing renders them less effective as teachings, because we have no model audience. In addition they do not preserve any of the anecdotal tradition of the Buddha's great storytelling occasions. These texts are solely about the Bodhisattva's great acts of the past.

### **Textual Community**

We have now examined the role of the Buddha as narrator and of the audience for his stories as it is presented within the narrative frame of the JA. We have seen that the dialogical setting allows the Buddha to be viewed as the source of all wisdom (worldly and Buddhist) and a man with a solution to every problem. His ability to recount his own past and that of other people establishes him as a great spiritual leader, with supernormal vision into the way the universe operates. The audience within the story are preserved as representatives of all Buddhists, requesting and receiving these nuggets of insight from the All-Knowing One. They model the learning process, trusting the Buddha's understanding of *kamma* and of human nature, and applying his wisdom to their own lives and paths. The predominantly monastic audience establishes the authority of the monastic redactors who have compiled and preserved the text, and thereby reinforces the authenticity of the text itself. These many benefits are brought about by the simple narrative frame of the stories of the JA.

When this frame is lost, as in the case of the JM and CP, there is a tendency to view *jātakas* solely as stories illustrating the actions and path of the Buddha, both in order to glorify the person of the Bodhisatta and to instruct those wishing to emulate him. This is clearly the purpose of both the JM and the CP, but it is not an interpretation that can be read back into the JA. In fact, the oldest birth stories we have – those embedded in *sutta* texts of the *nikāyas* –

demonstrate that this was far from the earliest use of the stories. Instead these stories demonstrate the inferiority of the Bodhisatta in comparison to the Buddha. The actions of the Bodhisatta are good, but solely in a non-Buddhist context: he is skilled craftsman (*Pacetana sutta*, AN 3, 15), organizes a great bloodless sacrifice (*Kūṭadanta sutta*, DN 5), amasses great wealth (*Mahāsudassana sutta*, DN 17) and gives it away to various worthy recipients (*Velāma sutta*, AN 9, 20), or renounces and teaches the way to the heavenly realms (*Mahāgovinda sutta*, DN 19; *Makhādeva sutta*, MN 83). In each story the Buddha makes an explicit comparison between the skills and activities of the Bodhisatta and his own superior achievements, so – he points out – teaching the way to heaven is inferior to teaching the eightfold path to *nibbāna*, and being skilled in dealing with the flaws of wood is not as good as being skilled with regard to the flaws of body, speech and mind. Far from glorifying the Bodhisatta's long path to eventual buddhahood, these early *jātaka* stories highlight the inferiority and mundane skills of the Bodhisatta. This is not done in order to demonstrate the failings of the Bodhisatta, however, but rather to highlight the limited opportunities for spiritual progress that are found in a world without Buddhism. Thus in these texts the Buddha tells *jātaka* stories in order to make the audience appreciate his great achievements and the benefit he has brought to the world.

This early ideology of *jātaka* stories – that they demonstrate the superiority of the Buddha and the great contribution he has made to humankind by founding the Buddhist community and teaching the *dhamma* – is preserved to a certain extent in the JA, where the Buddha's presence seems at least equally important to that of the Bodhisatta. That the JA is in some sense *about* the Buddha rather than Bodhisatta is suggested by the *Nidāna-kathā*, a long biographical preface to the JA that traces the Buddha's long career from his initial resolve at the foot of Dīpaṅkara Buddha right through to the donation of the Jeta Grove to the Buddhist monastic community by Anāthapiṇḍika. The Jeta Grove is the setting in which the Buddha is said to have related many of his birth stories, including the first one, which is – one suspects not coincidentally – related to Anāthapiṇḍika. The *Nidāna-kathā* thus acts as a preface to the stories of the present, rather than

the stories of the past, and provides an explanation for how the Buddha has become able to tell these many stories. The setting of *jātaka* narrations in a biography of the Buddha is also found in the *Mahāvastu*, a Lokkotaravādin text that traces a similar biography to the *Nidāna-kathā*. In this text, *jātaka* stories are primarily told to illustrate certain events in the Buddha's final life, for example there is a cluster of stories surrounding the courting of the Buddha's wife, who, we discover, has been his wife many times in the past. Whether or not the Buddha had to win his bride in the past too would seem to fit better into a discussion of the Buddha than of the Bodhisatta or his path.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the JA is a very important text in the history of the *jātaka* genre, since its many layers of composition reflect both the old association of stories with glorifying the Buddha's achievements, and evolving ideas about the *bodhisatta* path and the extent to which it should be emulated by Buddhist practitioners.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the compositional history of the JA the *jātaka* genre was understood as being about the Bodhisatta and his path, and so subsequent texts saw the frame narrative that depicts the Buddha as omniscient narrator as dispensable. However, the stories of the present in the JA clearly demonstrate the importance of the Buddha in an understanding of his birth stories, as well as the centrality of his audience, who request and listen to his narrations.

It is not only in the stories of the present that other characters play a role: on many occasions characters in the past are identified with specific members of the early Buddhist community. In many of the stories of the past the Bodhisatta is not even the central character,

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<sup>33</sup> See in particular Chapters 3–5 of Appleton, *Jātaka Stories in Theravāda Buddhism*. Briefly speaking, I argue that the framing of the stories by the JA and the addition of the *Nidāna-kathā* transformed *jātakas* from stories about events witnessed by the Buddha to stories about the *bodhisatta* path. The individual stories predate this focus upon the Bodhisatta and his path, which explains why so many of them sit uneasily with the tradition's definition of *jātakas* as stories about the gradual acquisition of the qualities required for buddhahood (stated in the introductory verses of the JA and assumed by texts such as the *Cariyāpiṭaka*).

but is rather a passer-by or witness, later recalling the actions of other people.<sup>34</sup> For example in the *Lakkhaṇa-jātaka* (JA 11) the Buddha tells of how the senior monk Sāriputta was born as a stag who judiciously led a herd of deer to safety, whilst his brother – a previous birth of the schismatic monk and quintessential villain Devadatta – led his herd to ruin. The Bodhisatta was their father, but played a minimal role in the story. The JA is therefore not a text simply about the Bodhisatta's actions, but is about the experiences of the founder of the Buddhist community, and his interactions with other members of that community both in the past and during his final life.

For the JA, the dialogue between the Buddha and his audience is not an incidental frame that can be ignored at will. As Esposito also states in the case of Jain literature, the embedded nature of dialogue matters. It gives the text its very meaning, granting authenticity to the stories and their redactors, glorifying the narrator, and creating a sense of community both past and present. Modern audiences are part of this community, modelling their actions on audience members or on the Buddha himself, or perhaps identifying themselves with characters in the past. They too are in a dialogue with the Buddha and his early followers.

### Abbreviations

AN Aṅguttara Nikāya

CP Cariyāpiṭaka

DN Dīgha Nikāya

JA Jātakatthavaṇṇanā

JM Jātakamālā

MN Majjhima Nikāya

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<sup>34</sup> The identification of one character – even a silent and totally uninvolved witness – with the Bodhisatta, despite the Buddha's ability to also see the past births of other people as well as himself, is a requirement of the JA and the *jātaka* genre more widely, but should not be seen as indicating the *jātakas* are always *about* the Bodhisatta.

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